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Considering citizenship in imperial Chinese history

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ABSTRACT

This article problematizes the meaning and use of ‘citizen’ and ‘subject’ in the global historiography of citizenship. It argues that if in pre-twentieth-century European history citizens have also been subjects, in imperial Chinese history subjects have also been citizens. This argument is laid out in three steps. The first step, which has typically been disregarded in prior discussions on the topic, establishes that membership in some form of political community was articulated through political metaphors and illustrates this on the basis of the body metaphor. Whether and how the people’s membership in the polity also constitutes them as citizens is then addressed through an overview of the rules that govern the reciprocity between those groups constituting the polity and, finally, through a discussion of the types of action open to commoners to shape especially local governance.

KEYWORDS

Chinese citizenship; subjecthood; body politic; political metaphor; global historiography of citizenship; asymmetrical comparison

When Chinese translators and intellectuals in the early twentieth century rendered ‘citizen’ or ‘citizenship’ in Chinese, they routinely used native terms like ‘*guomin*’ 國民 (literally, ‘the people of the country/state’); they did not opt for transliteration as a strategy to convey the foreignness and radical alterity of the concept. The concept they introduced was, nevertheless, new. Chinese reformers associated with *guomin* or *min* (the people; citizen or citizens) a set of other concepts that derived from western philosophical literature: equality, rights, freedom, autonomy. In Guo Zhonghua’s reading, the first generation of reformers tended to view state reform as a precondition for the cultivation of a new kind of politically engaged citizen, whereas those writing after the establishment of the Republic of China tended to argue that western-style individualism was the precondition for the development of a new citizenry, which in turn would determine the success of the Chinese nation-state (2014; Guo and Guo 2015).

The literature on Chinese citizenship tends to focus on the twentieth-century history and present condition of Chinese citizens and notions of citizenship, and see citizenship as a product of European institutions and western Enlightenment philosophy without a history in the Chinese past. Hence, in Kathryn Wegner’s (2014) recent call for a global historiography of citizenship, Chinese citizenship is not introduced in the affirmative but rather as a question: ‘A Chinese Citizenship?’ In this article I aim to respond to Wegner’s call for a global historiography of citizenship. In addition to the rich work already undertaken to trace the transformations of citizenship in theory and practice in

European contexts, such a global history also aims to ‘illuminate how peoples around the world have worked out living together and governing themselves, and show how ordinary people in many places and times have used, if not the particular term, then the language of citizenship, to demand better lives’ (146).

The modern Chinese (and East Asian) translation of political citizenship, *guomin/kokumin*, offers a point of departure, a point from which to look back at the historical concept *min* (including not only the term *min* but also associated terms) and its embeddedness in broader models of governance that have changed over time and across East Asia. Throughout imperial Chinese history *min* denoted the majority of the people belonging to the political community overseen by a ruler (*jun* 君, *zhu* 主) through the mediation of officials (*chen* 臣, *guan* 官). These three elements constituted the body or the organization of the polity and were fully dependent on each other: without the ruler there was no people and no officialdom to speak of, without officials a ruler could not govern, and without the trust of the people the ruler could no longer be considered a ruler. With this model Chinese emperors and officials defined who belonged to the community they claimed to govern and who was governable, excluding those who belonged to communities governed by others (the *min* of other states) and those who, through their status or their own actions, no longer qualified as *min* belonging to the same body as ruler and officials, but who became rebels (*kou* 寇, *zei* 賊) placing themselves outside the political organization of the community.

This theoretical model is obviously not based on equality (equal participation) or individualism (liberty), the two vectors along which citizenship has been construed in, for example, American history. Rather it is based on reciprocity between the core groups that constitute the polity, a reciprocity based on a hierarchy of roles and on the assumption of group membership within each of these roles. The latter does not imply that the individual is erased or does not matter, but rather that roles determine appropriate action for both individual and the group – *min* is more than a collective noun and stands for an individual commoner with a specific name, a group of individual commoners, or the entirety of all commoners of either a particular jurisdiction or the polity as a whole. Below I will first explain the conceptual framework for the reciprocal relationships between ruler, officials, and the people. I will do this on the basis of a discussion of the broadly shared metaphor of the body for the organization and operation of the polity. In the second section I set out the rules that govern these reciprocal relationships, surveying both the dues and rewards for each group. In the final section I move from the conceptual framework to a discussion of citizen agency. Here I ask what happens if expectations go unfulfilled, focusing on the recourse open to commoners to shape especially local governance.¹ In sections two and three I also explain how this approach to the history of Chinese citizenship differs from current approaches that are derived from European experiences of state formation and why rethinking these approaches matters.

My observations will be mainly based on a selection of texts from two genres of administrative manuals: the mirror to princes genre and local governance manuals. This choice entails the risk that these observations are based exclusively on normative texts compiled by officials at court and in the provinces and thus do not address or give voice to citizen action. I hope to show, nevertheless, that political advice literature and administrative manuals offer relevant insight not only into the

question of how membership of the political community (or political citizenship) was expressed and understood theoretically by those in power in late imperial China, but also, into the opposition to state power, and, more often, its adaptation to the goals of individual commoners and groups of commoners. Because governance manuals were based on real cases and administrative experience, and aimed to transmit administrative experience, their authors allow insight into the interaction between governing and being governed on both the central and local levels. I will mainly draw from *The Essentials of Governance of the Reign of Constancy Revealed* (*Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要, hereafter *The Essentials of Governance*) and *Fuhui quanshu* 福惠全書 (*A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence*) to illustrate my arguments. The former was one of the most influential examples in the mirror to princes genre (and has continued its reputation in modern leadership literature), and the latter one of the most comprehensive compendia on local governance. These texts were conceived centuries apart in time. I draw from them here to offer critical reflections on our use of ‘citizen’ and ‘subject’ in writing Chinese history and do so by highlighting select aspects of political metaphors and modes of local action; the varieties of the political imaginaries expressed in such metaphors and in the forms of local agency, as well as changes therein over time, are not among the objectives of this thought-piece.

By turning the light back on the conceptual history of the *min* in the republican translation of *guomin*, I also aim to reconstruct some of the resonances that have shaped and continue to shape modern Chinese understandings of citizenship. As the mirror that I will be drawing upon here has recently become ‘the ancient model of the Chinese Dream’, and classical Chinese canonical literature has been restored to priority status in school curricula and in the media during the past decade, the legacy of historical concepts in the translingual practice of citizenship is especially relevant once again (Lei 2013; Liu 1995).

Reciprocity imagined: the body politic

Using the body or its parts as a metaphor to understand the polity is, in European-language discussions, typically conceived of as a core feature of western political thought. When I used the term ‘body politic’ as one among a series of concepts in Chinese political thought that deserved more analytical attention in a roundtable on global intellectual history, I was immediately reminded that this would be an imposition of a western model and asked why I did not use indigenous terms. Similarly, in recent Chinese-language scholarship, the body as a metaphor to understand governance and the distribution of power is seen as a core feature of the cognitive structure of Chinese political thought. More than an early product of Chinese political thought, this cognitive structure shapes the conditions under which thoughts can be produced. For Xiao Yanzhong, for example, the organic body as metaphor is the foundation for other principles in early Chinese thought: the human body was the vehicle for understanding social organization and government (from the family to the polity) and for understanding the structure and operation of the cosmos; the initial structural relationships between the human body, human society, and the cosmos were in this view not conceived the other way around.

For Xiao the ‘body metaphor’ is a uniquely Chinese phenomenon from which other essential features of Chinese thought can be inferred: the focus on the body would imply that any religiosity that transcended the here and now could not take root and that an ethics focused on human relationships would take its place. The prioritization of the body in political thought would furthermore imply that ‘the collective has from beginning to end enjoyed absolute priority in Chinese thinking’; that ritual would become highly valued in governance; and that rights and individualism could not ‘logically exist’ (Xiao 2005, 143).

Both claims of exceptionalism are equally problematic and both proceed from deeply held beliefs about the essential nature of ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ culture. Medieval European metaphors of the body were also organic, hierarchical, and focused on the ruler; from early imperial times terms such as ‘the body of the state’ (*guoti* 國體), ‘the body of governance’ (*zhengti* 政體), or ‘the body of the sovereign’ (*junti* 君體) became part of Chinese (and later East Asian) political discourse and metaphors of the body and body parts had already come into use in the centuries of interstate warfare leading up to the early empires to discuss the parts, the structure, the organization, and the operation of the polity overseen by a ‘head’ (Yang 1993; Zhang 2000; Huang 2002, 2006, 2008; Xiao 2006; Li 2012; de Pee 2018; Hartman 2015).

In both the European- and Chinese-language traditions, therefore, the body metaphor was used to conceptually bring people together as one community (one body) while simultaneously ordering them into a hierarchy of power. *The Essentials of Governance* opens with the following words of Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–49):

Early in the Zhenguan reign, Emperor Taizong said to the attendant officials: ‘In undertaking the sovereign’s way, it is necessary first to preserve the common people. To serve one’s own body by harming the common people would be like slicing one’s calf-muscle in order to feed one’s stomach; the stomach might be full but the body would be destroyed.’ (Chen Forthcoming, #1; Xie 2003, 11)

The Essentials of Governance was compiled sometime between the 700s and 720s and has since the eighth century been used and adapted to educate rulers, princes, officials, and commoners throughout East Asia (De WeerdT and McMullen Forthcoming). The first passage in the first chapter on ‘The Way of the Sovereign’ in this classic work thus starts with the emperor’s invoking an image in which the ruler (the stomach) and the calf-muscle (the people) are part of one body. Leaving aside for the moment the fact that in this particular case the point of the entire passage (and therefore also the selected metaphors) is to underscore the direct link between the ruler’s self-discipline, in particular the disciplining of his own bodily desires, and socio-political order, the choice of two body parts to describe the relationship between the sovereign and the people suggests that, to Taizong, ruler and people formed ‘one body’ (*yiti* 一體). The potential destruction of the body if the stomach were to harm the calf-muscle illustrates two further aspects of this imaginary body constituted by sovereign and people. First, just as the harm done to the calf-muscle will result in both the destruction of the body and, ultimately, the full stomach, so the relationship between the ruler and the people is interdependent and determines the survival of the entire polity. Second, the stomach and the calf muscles are not equal, not in terms of their location in the structure of the body and also not in terms of their authority within it.

The significance of the body parts used for comparison and their location within the body is evident from another passage in *The Essentials of Governance*. Here Taizong and his advisor Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643) return to some of the earliest articulations of the idea that the people form ‘one body’ with the ruler:

In Zhenguan 14 [640] Lord Specially Advanced Wei Zheng submitted a memorial that said: ‘I have heard that a sovereign is the head and his officials act as his limbs. When they cooperate and share the same mind, they combine and form one body. If a body is deficient, it cannot form a person. Even though the head is esteemed and lofty, it necessarily depends on arms and legs to form a body. Although a sovereign is enlightened and wise, he must depend upon his limbs to bring about good order. Hence *The Rites* [XXX] says, “To the people the sovereign is as their mind; to the sovereign the people are as his body. When the mind is composed, the body is at ease; when the mind is reverent, the face is respectful.” (Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, Part IV, *The Li Ki*, Book XXX “The Black Robes,” No.17, 359) *The Documents* [II.4] says, “When the head is intelligent, the limbs are well; all business will thrive.” (Adapted from Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Vol.3 Part 1, *Documents*, “The Books of Yu,” Book IV “Yih and Tseih,” 90) [and II.4] “When the head is vexed, the limbs are idle; all affairs will go to ruin.” (90) But I have never heard that a complete body can achieve order when the limbs are neglected and only the heart put in charge.’ (Chu [Forthcoming](#), #212; Xie 2003, 402–403)

From the passages from two of the Five Classics quoted by Wei Zheng it is clear that the structure of the imaginary body politic was not fixed. The ruler could be compared to the head, the heart/mind, or, as we saw earlier, the stomach. The officials were the limbs, or, elsewhere, the eyes and ears, or the hands and feet (especially lower-ranked officials). The people were the physical body (especially in those cases where the ruler was the heart/mind), the hands and feet, or, the calf-muscle. In all cases, however, the ruler’s position is situated in the upper body and near the center; officials come next as the organs of perception and the limbs who set the body in motion; and the people are situated in the peripheral zones where they execute menial tasks that are critical to the survival of the higher and more central organs and the body as a whole. The body as an image of both unity and internal hierarchical organization was also applied in the lifetime of Taizong and Wei Zheng to the geography of the Tang Empire: ‘The realm is like one body: the two capitals [the eastern and western capitals of Luoyang and Chang’an] are the heart; the prefectures and counties are the four limbs; the barbarian peoples are things outside of the body.’ (Zhang 2000, 37; Sima 1956, 197.6207). Just as the ruler was central to the body politic, so the capitals were central to the geography of the polity; the prefectures and counties, where the majority of the commoners lived, were subordinate to the ruler and the capital, but they, unlike the barbarians, made up a single body.

The body was not only used as a metaphor to understand the role played by different members of the community and the relationships between them, the concept of the organic body also had implications for the understanding of processes of change affecting the body as a whole. Organic bodies are born, grow, get ill due to internal and/or external causes, are healed, age, and die. Similarly, Chinese historians early on developed and transmitted the notion that rulers were not granted dominium or the right to govern territories as they pleased and for eternity. Rather, they and their families were given a conditional mandate to rule. Even though the physical body of a founding ruler was subject to a very limited lifespan, he (not she in dynastic Chinese

history) could pass on the body (*jiti* 繼體) to his male descendants as long as they observed the mandate granted by Heaven (*Tian ming* 天命). The mandate was from the start finite; historical and philosophical texts taught that it was likely to come to an end (just as the lifespan, also *ming*, given to individual beings was certain to end) because rulers, officials, and the people would over time fail to operate as one body. In the eyes of Taizong and his advisors, the body politic headed by the Sui Dynasty (581–618) had become corrupted and eventually ‘disintegrated’ (*jieti* 解體). Social disorder had ensued and, eventually, one person from among the commoners would heal and reconstitute the body of the polity. Taizong, the second Tang emperor who had played an important role in his father’s founding of the Tang Dynasty, was keenly aware of the precariousness of the imperial throne and referred to his early years as that time of his life when he was still ‘living among the people’ and knew their ‘bitter hardship’ (De Weerdts and McMullen *Forthcoming*, #99, #103, #112; Xie 2003, 212, 220, 251).

This notion of the body politic as an organism whose health and life was under threat shaped the broader understanding of the relationship between the ruler and the people as well as the specific responsibilities ascribed to them (see section two below). As for the former, at least two different models of rulership had been developed in pre-imperial times, illustrating that the choice of metaphor leaves argumentative scope and need not determine the model of politics advanced. The Mencian model emphasized the interdependence between the various body parts, between the ruler and the officials and between the ruler and the people. According to Mencius (c. 371–c. 289 BCE) the officials’ service is conditional: ‘If the sovereign sees the officials as his hands and feet, then the officials will see the sovereign as the heart.’ Similarly, when the sovereign does not maintain the welfare of the people, they will in Mencius’ view rise up; such action is legitimate as the ruler is not fulfilling his proper role and ought to be seen as a robber, excluding himself from the body politic (*Mencius*, Li Lou B3 <https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=en&id=1702&remap=gb#s10032565>). The model created by Xunzi (3rd C BCE) and Han Fei (3rd C BCE), on the other hand, prioritized the control that the central organ ought to exercise over the other parts; their philosophies elaborated on the absolute authority of the sovereign and the obeisance of officials and the people to him. The Way of the ruler was to have ‘the realm follow him as one body just as the four limbs follow the heart’ (*Xunzi* XII; Knoblock 1990, 185). The position of the officials towards the sovereign was ‘the position of the inferior towards the superior, like the son serving his father, like the younger brother serving the older brother, and like the hands and arms protecting the head and eyes and covering the chest and stomach’ (*Xunzi* XV; Knoblock 1990, 220; Huang 2008, 296–97).

In later texts such as *The Essentials of Governance* that foregrounded a Mencian view, reciprocity remained the ideal but all organs were also conceived of as potential sources of danger to the body’s equilibrium. The people regularly emerged as a threat. After having introduced the polity as a single body bringing the ruler and the people together, the first chapter of *The Essentials of Governance* further explains why moderation on the part of the ruler is necessary to keep the body whole:

‘...Since We dwell within a system of nine gates [that is, deep within the palace], We are unable to view all affairs throughout the world, and so We distribute the task among you officials to act as Our ears and eyes. Let no one be inattentive just because

the world is currently without problems and at peace. “Is it not the sovereign who should be cherished? Is it not the people who should be feared? [quoting *The Documents* II.2]” With the Son of Heaven, if he has the Way, then the people will support him as their ruler; if he lacks the Way, then the people will abandon and discard him – something truly to be feared!’ Wei Zheng replied, ‘... Moreover, I have heard an old saying that goes: “The sovereign is the boat, and the people are the water. The water may keep the boat afloat, but it can also overturn it.” Your Majesty takes the people as something to be feared, and indeed it is really as You have pronounced.’ (Chen [Forthcoming](#), #12. Xie 2003, 33-34.)

The water metaphor tapped into an imagery relating to water management that had, like the body metaphor, been used to advance different models of governance (Zhang 2000, 42). Just as the water had to be managed (*zhi* 治) or blocked (*fang* 防) with dikes, so the mouths and the emotions of the people were to be guarded against (*fang*) lest their resentment (*min yuan* 民怨) lead to the fall of the dynasty and the state. Apart from blocking mechanisms, ‘channels’ were also advocated and institutionalized to ‘guide’ popular feeling (section three below).

The concept of the people from which the modern Chinese term citizen was derived was articulated in both the canonical corpus and in later administrative manuals as ‘the foundation of the polity,’ the foundation ‘without whose trust governance could not be established’ (Xie 2003, 308, 537; De Weerd, Dudbridge, and van Beijeren [Forthcoming](#), #144, #279). Establishing and maintaining that trust was ultimately the responsibility of the ruler. Mirror texts like *The Essentials of Governance* tended to underscore the danger posed by the people and the fear they should inspire in those governing them, but their main purpose was to contain a graver danger, that posed by the ruler himself. Even though the focus is here on the representation of the people in administrative manuals, I will briefly discuss this aspect of Chinese governance as it underlies the dues and rewards that are the subject of the following section.

Like their European, West Asian, and South Asian counterparts, Chinese rulers and advisors compiled mirrors to instruct aspiring monarchs in rules and models for action, what they should know and be, and how they should act. The underlying assumption was that the ruler embodied the people and that it was his governance that formed the polity rather than the other way around. On the basis of historical cases, the ruler was portrayed as an ambivalent figure who was at once essential but also of grave danger to the survival of the dynastic state (De Weerd and McMullen [Forthcoming](#)). The body of the ruler was a microcosm of the body of the polity: failure to control the senses and practise moderation would result in the impoverishment of the people and their resentment would lead to the fragmentation of the state. In order to determine what level of moderation was needed when, Chinese rulers were advised to keep abreast of people’s reactions to the circumstances (*minqing* 民情, *renqing* 人情). At the conceptual level the people were imagined to act in unison: the people was an organism that possessed a shared nature (*xing* 性) and that expressed feelings or reactions to circumstances (*qing*). Their nature and feelings were governed by a shared heart/mind (*xin* 心). Customs or conventional behaviour was the visible behaviour revealing the people’s mind. This behaviour ought to be transformed by the ruler’s governance, but he could only do so if he was connected to and fully comprehended (*tong* 通) their reactions to circumstances and healed (*zhi* 治) their mind.

The ruler was therefore a monitor, a healer, and also a corrector of the people's mind. In 632 Wei Zheng advised Taizong against spending human labour and resources on the Sacrifices to Heaven and Earth and, in this way, to continue to act as 'a fine doctor to the people' (Xie 2003, 126). In this respect rulership and the relationship between the ruler and the people both overlapped and differed in medieval Chinese and European mirrors. As Michel Senellart has shown, in medieval European mirrors the disciplining of the ruler's body was also the central axis around which polities took shape. From early to late medieval times a model of rulership in which the ruler acted as the corrector of fallen human souls gave way to a model in which the ruler emerged as the navigator or director who led the people to salvation, a role that would be gradually taken over by governments aiming to preserve the state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Senellart 1995, esp. chs 1.2, 2.1, 2.4).

From the above it is clear that membership of a political community was, at a conceptual level, articulated in imperial Chinese history (as in medieval Europe) through the metaphor of an organic body consisting of hierarchically organized parts that were dependent on each other. Membership in the polity was corporate. The political community itself was an organic whole and its wellbeing and lifespan depended on the performance of reciprocal obligations and the reception of benefits among the head, the limbs, and the hands and feet. Failure or neglect on the part of any organ endangered the integrity of the community as a whole. Establishing the existence of membership in a shared polity is a necessary first step towards considering citizenship in Chinese history. It is a step that has either been assumed as a silent given or disregarded in prior discussions on this topic.²

Reciprocity materialized: the basic rules

The next step is to consider the question whether the membership of the people in the polity as described above constitutes them as citizens. The hierarchical organization of the polity and the way in which the relationship between the ruler and the people is imagined would suggest that the body politics of imperial China supports the argument that the people are subjects, not citizens. This argument is best set out in Roy Bin Wong's 'Citizenship in Chinese History' but, in less articulate forms, it represents a widely shared view, also among Chinese historians. Based on a theoretically informed comparison of state-society relations in Europe and China since 1600, Wong concludes that China did not and does not have citizens; the same would be true for 'the subjects of many authoritarian regimes' (1999, 117).

Citizenship is of course a term whose meaning has changed over time and has been politically contested; as an analytical term it has also gone through significant revision. Recent theoretical and methodological revisions are likely to bring about a de-provincialization of the history of citizenship particularly as it obtains to the pre-eighteenth century world. Modern citizenship has conventionally been defined on the basis of rights and legal contractual thinking and is typically given a European genealogy linking Roman law to medieval towns and early modern states. Within this framework citizenship is a uniquely European invention, one that can at best be temporarily approximated in other histories, as in the early Chinese city-states. The fate of such approximations is predestined to end in failure due to a lack of other essential features

of European development. By drawing on more dynamic understandings of citizenship as rooted in political action and in the continual negotiation of processes of social inclusion and exclusion, we can open up the history of relations between state actors and the governed.

My reason for doing this is not to argue that there were western-style citizens in Chinese history after all, nor to dispute the historical meanings of the term or Chinese equivalents. Rather it is to use a more expansive analytical framework for writing the history of politics; the problem with existing analytical frameworks is in some ways less the negation of the existence of citizenship in Chinese history, it is rather their insistence that Chinese states have historically only had subjects. In contrast with the richer historiography on subjecthood and imperial citizenship in the modern British Empire (Gorman 2007, ch., 1),³ subjects are in the context of Chinese history and Sino-European comparative history imagined with all the attributes of Eurocentric historiography, that is the absence of the rights, privileges, freedoms, and autonomy enjoyed by European citizens. Subjects lack profile, agency, and do not have a history.

Let us consider how Wong differentiates between European state-citizen and Chinese state-subject relationships: 'Chinese political practice created popular expectations through official commitments, while European governments negotiated with their elites, who sought to make claims. European claim-making was part of a broader effort made by European elites to defend their autonomous spaces through negotiation and struggle' (Wong 1999, 100). Wong adopts Charles Tilly's transactional model of citizenship in which persons and state agents bargain and negotiate on the basis of mutual rights and obligations which are enforceable by a third party. In contrast to such transactions, Chinese state-subject relations were a one-way traffic affair: Chinese subjects could not make claims, they could have expectations and these expectations were defined by state agents. When expectations were not met, they had no institutional recourse; they could 'protest' but because they could not make 'claims,' the best they could hope for was that officials would act on 'an incentive to define people's expectations in a manner that they believed the state could meet' (100).

Official interpretations of the expectations that governed the relationships between court, officialdom, and the people were set out in the administrative manuals under review here. I will survey expectations and benefits below before moving on to an assessment of the role of protest, claim-making, and negotiation in the definition and application of these expectations in the next section. The emperor and the local administration defined the obligations of the people under their direct control mainly in the areas of taxes, corvée labour, military service, and socio-political order. Families were expected to ensure the timely delivery of tax grains or monetary payments, the extra fees that had over time been added to regular levies, and to provide free labour for infrastructural projects or transportation. Mutual responsibility schemes at times also obligated families to ensure that those belonging to the same unit would make timely payments. Some were expected to provide military service or, on a rotating basis, to serve in sub-bureaucratic headship roles for lower-level units of social organization. In addition, the people were expected to keep the peace locally, and, from the perspective of local administrators in particular, to keep the soaring levels of litigation of which local administrations had been complaining since the eleventh century, low. To facilitate this process the people were also at times, depending on the initiative of emperors,

ministers, or local officials, expected to participate in communal activities such as the reading of community compacts and imperial edicts, the local banquet ceremony, or the welcoming or sending off of ranking officials. Huang Liu-Hung's detailed seventeenth-century manual for local magistrates, *Fuhui quanshu* 福惠全書 (available in an extensive albeit partial translation as *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence*), for example, describes the regulations for the participation of officials, the local scholar-official families, examination graduates, and the commoners at the lectures of Emperor Kangxi's 'Sacred Edict' to be held in the second month of each season 'in each rural area' 'where there are sufficient people to hold such meetings' (Djang 1984, 531, 533).

The levels of contribution in each of these areas varied depending on the family's status in the official ranking order of local society, with tax benefits accruing to those in official service or achieving examination success, and higher levels of community involvement expected from government school students, examination graduates of different ranks, officials awaiting assignment or in retirement, and village elders. A telling example in *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence* is the acknowledgment that without the 'free contributions from the local gentry' there would be insufficient funds to set up public schools 'even if we exhaust all the resources of the district.' Huang further stated that teachers should be selected and recommended by the local people (536–37). Already in the twelfth and thirteenth century local elites and local administrators advocated less state activism and appealed to the voluntary involvement of local elites families in various aspects of local organization including famine relief, community granaries, local infrastructure projects, public health, religious spaces and practice, as well as education (Hymes 1986, 1993; Wong 1996; Gao 2006, 2009).

The processes that widened the scope of local elite activity, or at least rendered such activity conspicuous in the historical record, should lead us to question a model that opposes expectations defined by official grace (in Chinese history) to claims made through state-elite negotiation (in European history). The authors of local administrative manuals underscore time and again the importance of networking with local elites in written correspondence and in person, individually and as a group. As I have shown elsewhere, the twin processes of marketization (including the privatization of land) and centralization (or deeper government penetration) in the eleventh century had unforeseen but lasting side-effects, creating demand for mediators from among the local population and, through the large-scale increase of (largely unsuccessful) examination candidates, supplying this demand (De Weerdt and Watts [Forthcoming](#)). In addition to legal experts and notaries who mediated between commoners and short-staffed governments at lower and, in appeals, higher levels, students and examination graduates also presumed to act on behalf of the community as a whole. Here one example may suffice to illustrate how 'official expectations' were adjusted on the basis of negotiations that took place locally. Huang Liuhong warned aspiring and practising local magistrates against examination graduates who took advantage of the ceremonies at the Confucian temple over which magistrates were required to preside; after the ritual and readings were over these licentiates presented petitions to 'discuss the rights and wrongs in the local administration or expose the corrupt practices of certain clerks and runners.' Despite his misgivings about such practices, Huang advised readers to investigate the validity of

their reports and take remedial measures if the claims were valid (Djang 1984, 104–105). Before making administrative changes, he recommended that the magistrate ‘should also make sure that his proposal has the approval of the majority of the local gentry as well as the commoners, and he must have that consensus before he makes the recommendation’ (598). This suggests that negotiations between state agents, elites, and commoners were taking place in imperial Chinese history and could be effective there as well, but as we shall see in the next section the forms, channels, scope, and impact of negotiation differed.

In exchange for the obligations due to the ruler and his administrative apparatus, commoners received economic, social, military, and legal protection. Bin Wong notes that the official framework provided something in the direction of social citizenship (as opposed to civil or political citizenship which had preceded social citizenship in Marshall’s history of the development of citizenship in British history) (Wong 1999, 100, 112–113; Marshall 1963 1998: commoners should enjoy basic welfare in the form of sustenance, shelter, and, according to *The Essentials of Governance*, basic welfare also included the comfort of a family (Xie 2003, 113–114). At times of crisis commoners ought to receive famine relief. As in patriarchal societies elsewhere, Chinese legal codes also provided special protection to those deemed incapable of caring for themselves: infants, women, girls, and servants. Local administrative manuals added the destitute, travelers, and the dead to this list of categories of people requiring special attention (Djang 1984, ch. 31). Commoners should also enjoy fair treatment in their relations to the state: they ought to be protected against the financial exploitation and violence of bullies, engrossers, corrupt state agents, and other kinds of intermediaries. They were also promised security against internal and external military threats. In the cultural sphere, education was also considered a service the state should provide, but, as Huang Liuhong admitted, the relatively scarce resources of imperial Chinese states implied that public education remained an area in which government expectations nor demand could be met. Finally, despite assumptions about the lack of civil law in the Chinese legal tradition, it is obvious from the large number of cases and legal handbooks that have come down from the Song period onwards that commoners sought and received state protection in all manner of civil cases as well as cases brought against state agents.

To protect commoners against intermediaries local governments regularly resorted to the tactic of beating the competition at their own game, as in the following example drawn from the legal arena. Ever since the twelfth century magistrates complained about local scholars and ranking families occupying space in front of the yamen. They sought to instigate and acquire business from commoners and also set up hotels and restaurants near the yamen for those who had to travel to bring a case. Huang Liuhong charged that they monopolized business from litigants and charged exorbitant prices for board, lodging, and other services. Huang reasoned that ‘prohibition would not be as effective as competition. Out of my own allowance I bought a piece of land beside the yamen and built a simple house containing ten rooms with an enclosure wall. At the front of the entrance was a sign called “the litigants” shelter’ (house for the convenience of the people). This shelter was provided for the use of male litigants. Within the wall, on the left of the shelter, was another building, with five rooms for family members of female litigants...’ (262–63). Here we find a concrete admission on the part of

a government official of the reverse effect that elite adaptations of state practices had on local government itself, in this case on the further provision of public services.⁴

The expectations held of the commoners suggest what benefits would accrue to emperor and officialdom (material and human resources, social order, and loyalty) and the benefits due to the people clearly articulate what obligations the directing organs shared. In addition, rulers were expected to regulate their persons and their families to guarantee people's livelihood and avoid unnecessary warfare and, on an administrative level, to select the right personnel, to solicit and accept criticism from specially appointed advisors as well as from officials of all ranks and the commoners. At lower levels of the administrative apparatus officials were expected to abide by these same rules, but, in addition, they were expected to communicate, investigate, negotiate, and collaborate directly with colleagues and local populations. They also owed allegiance to emperor and dynastic house.

The specific content of expectations is not what is at stake in debates about the history of Chinese citizenship – indeed, Roy Bin Wong captures the basic thrust of official commitments very well: the commitment to social stability and popular welfare was such that in the eighteenth century (and before) Chinese governments ‘created a scale of government granary reserves for food-supply management that dwarfed similar efforts by European governments’ (Wong 1999, 110; Wong and Will 1991). With the reciprocal nature of obligations and benefits in mind, we can question whether the binary opposition between negotiating citizens on the European side and Chinese subjects as passive and ineffectual recipients of official commitments best captures the different histories of European and Chinese state-society relations. Wong acknowledges that such a conclusion is a direct consequence of the definition of citizenship employed; the ideal type is constructed on the basis of conditions that applied in Western Europe. Here we pick up on one of the models for comparison Wong briefly presented as an alternative (Wong 1999, 117–18). When we think of citizen and subject as points on the opposite end of a continuum along which state-society relations can develop, we can trace historical change in such relations over time in particular polities. Such a model might, further down the line, also allow for the different rhythms with which different kinds of obligations and benefits develop and recede.

Monitoring reciprocity: the feelings of the people

The distinction drawn between European citizens and Chinese subjects in the historiography on the question of Chinese citizenship is based on the assumption that, when the expectations of individuals or groups of individuals towards central or local governments are not met, their only recourse is ‘protest.’ By implication, protest is ephemeral. It is unlikely to lead to beneficial outcomes for those engaged in it or to result in structural change in the medium or long run because protest is an informal reaction to expectations not set by citizens but by the authorities themselves, and because outcomes are entirely dependent on their arbitrary response. The forms of protest and their outcomes have not been subjected to critical examination in the literature on Chinese citizenship; below we will review administrative manuals for any evidence on protest, claim-making, and negotiation.

Popular protest in Chinese history typically calls to mind the large number of uprisings relating to taxation and alleged local government malfeasance. Such events were and remain frequent and ubiquitous. (For an overview of the older historiography on late imperial peasant uprisings, see Wakeman 1977; see also Chesnaux 1973; Feuerwerker 1975. On uprisings in the PRC, see O'Brien 2008; Thornton 2012.) Smaller or larger numbers of people gather, usually following a trigger event, and descend upon government offices or the property of the accused to make their grievances known and to demand action, often threatening and practising violence. Such events usually lead to the identification and rounding up of the leaders of the uprising and may or may not involve tax reductions and/or the investigation and impeachment of those accused of malfeasance. As Michael Szonyi (2017) has recently shown in the case of Ming Dynasty military households, when considered in the context of all manner of interactions with the state, protest of this kind was relatively uncommon. Members of military households devised a range of strategies to turn state expectations to their advantage, they developed 'an art of being governed.' This art consisted of ongoing negotiations between state actors and military households, and among members of the households (which over the centuries had become large families).

Popular protest makes an appearance in administrative literature. In the mirror literature it appears as an always existing threat when the people's livelihood is at risk (see section 1 above), but in local administrative handbooks popular protest is additionally understood as a practice that can subvert regular ritual exchanges between the people and the local administration. When discussing the effect of local service on an official's career prospects towards the end of his handbook, Huang Liuhong cautioned, 'If the magistrate cannot expect to enjoy a spontaneous expression of gratitude from the populace, such as "holding on to the shaft of his carriage or lying down in the ruts in front of it" as a symbolic gesture to delay his departure, he should at least do something to spare himself such embarrassing moments as having people throwing rocks at him at the time his entourage leaves the city' (Djang 1984, 618). Already in the thirteenth century local government officials referred to commoners gathering to 'throw bricks and filth at him, spitting at him and cursing him' in reference then to detained official personnel (McKnight and Liu 1999, 91, also 49, 411).

Local administrators had by then already learned to read local rituals to welcome and send off local administrators (who stayed in their positions for only two to three years or even shorter tenures) as part of their dealings with the locals. When a magistrate arriving in a new post came across a procession sending off his predecessor with great fanfare, he read it as a message addressed to himself: treat us well and you will receive similar treatment as your predecessor. Reputational damage deriving from local unrest or complaints had a direct impact on an official's career prospects as these were, alongside the reaching of tax quotas, criteria by which their performance was evaluated and on which reassignment depended. Conversely, local officials sought out local acclaim, and local elites were willing to comply if interactions with local officialdom were good and their interests met. Such endorsements could come in the form of texts crediting a magistrate with initiatives taken (for example, the building of bridges or schools), petitions to the court requesting that a magistrate be allowed to extend his tenure, or even a 'living shrine' (i.e. a shrine commemorating the exemplary actions taken by a magistrate who is still alive) (Schneewind 2018). In these areas as well, the

earliest extant handbooks warn against the bargaining power local elites aim to gain through such action. One anonymous magistrate declined an offer of a living shrine, preferring instead to let ‘the mouths of the people on the roads to become living tablets’ (McKnight and Liu 1999, 106).

Local magistrates were advised to avoid conflict with the local community and aimed to do so by ‘inquiring into the people’s emotions’ (fang 訪 minqing, renqing) – ‘qing’ means people’s reactions to external conditions, hence it is commonly translated as ‘emotion.’ Upon assuming office, local magistrates met not only with local staff (clerks, runners, and other sub-bureaucratic personnel who did not hold formal office and did not need to rotate) but also with local gentry. They were advised to investigate local circumstances and base the tenor of their administration on the priority of the needs identified (Djang 1984, 92). Local magistrates met with local gentry in the days following their entry into the yamen, corresponded with them, read through local regulations and gazetteers, and accepted petitions from students and licentiates. Local elders were also a source of information as they shared the task of mediating local conflicts. As shown in case studies of local administration between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, local administrators helped organize the provision of local services on the basis of such fact-finding missions and in response to the advocacy of local elites. In Suzhou, water management initiatives were undertaken as a result of official investigations, in response to written requests submitted by individual families, as well as on the initiative of wealthy families supplying materials and commoners contributing labour (Gao 2009, 192–93). Initiatives that came from the top required extensive negotiation in places where local elites had a strong foothold. Local magistrates engaged in extended written exchanges and meetings with the local gentry to gain their interest in supporting government-directed famine relief projects or to garner support for experimental land distribution schemes. Such meetings with ‘elders negotiating daily in the office’ could be spread across several months (Gao 2009, 197, and 2006). That commoners were right to make their voices heard and take action when they were not was also the opinion of Yuan Cai 袁采 (fl. 1140–1195), who compiled a manual for family management titled *Yuanshi shi fan* 袁氏世范 (translated by Patricia Ebrey as *Precepts for Social Life*): ‘When scholar-officials meet, they often say that the commoners of such-and-such county are peaceable, and the commoners of such-and-such another county are unruly. If you look into the grounds for these characterizations, you will see that if local commoners dare not utter a word, swallowing their sounds and sucking in their breath when they suffer from corrupt officials, then they are called “peaceable.” If they make lists of their official’s wrongs and bring charges to the prefecture or circuit attendants, then they are “unruly.” Isn’t this a distortion of the meaning of unruly?’ (Ebrey 1984, 273).

The tone in administrative manuals was, as we already noticed in the case of Huang Liuhong, to not introduce new measures without extensive networking with the community. Examples of magistrates whose reputations were ruined as a result of initiatives that were deemed to have ‘troubled the people’ were readily available but, by Song times, such condemnations were no longer only to be heard in rumour, they were also the pretext for lawsuits against local and regional government personnel, including both clerks and regular officials. For example, when Jia Dan 賈澣 (1038–1103) undertook a large-scale government-sponsored water management project in the Liangzhe region

(roughly covering the modern provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu) in 1072 as Assistant Director of the Court of Imperial Granaries, locals filed suit and appealed when they were rebuffed. They won on appeal, Jia was recalled, and the plans came to a halt. As Gao Keli suggests, the victors in this case were most likely those undertaking private projects who had learned that interfering with the livelihood of the people was a charge that could potentially do great damage to official careers and serve the interests of those bringing suit.

Lawsuits were not exceptional. The thirteenth-century legal handbook *Minggong shupan Qingming ji* 名公书判清明集 (*The Enlightened Judgments*) includes cases brought by commoners against officials and clerks; such cases can also be found in other contemporary sources. Cases could be brought by individuals or collectively. Since cases were registered, multiple cases filed individually were also kept track of. When cases were dismissed at the county level, or involved a local magistrate, they could be filed at higher levels. For example, *The Enlightened Judgments* includes a case entitled ‘an unfit magistrate’ in which a commoner files against the magistrate in charge: ‘The accusation recently brought by the citizen, Zhang Kui, before this office is as follows: the district magistrate sent Xu Fa and stockade soldiers under him into the countryside, as if they were to arrest bandits. The law does not permit stockade soldiers to go into the countryside...’ For this infraction and others relating to fees charged for petitions, the magistrate was demoted. To ensure swift compliance the judgment included the requirement that ‘report on compliance with this order is due in one day’ (McKnight and Liu 1999, 102–103). Interestingly, and rather unusually, the translator in this case translates ‘baixing’ 百姓 (literally, the hundred surnames, or one from among the hundred surnames, usually translated as commoner) as ‘citizen.’ The number of such cases were also testimony to the fact that awareness of the law and familiarity with bringing all manner of lawsuits had become part of local community life (Niu 2005, 102–106). Even though there was no ‘third party’ adjudicating cases between state agents and commoners, access to the hierarchy of officialdom meant that there were established channels by which commoners could request an official response to claims made against local state agents.

In addition to local ritual events and lawsuits there were other regular channels for bringing claims. During the Song Dynasty the Public Petitioners’ Drum Office (Guyuan 鼓院) was established in the capital where civil and military officials of all rank, scholars, and the commoners could bring petitions relating to court administration, private and public matters, military secrets and to request redress if wronged or rewards for exemplary behaviour or service (Toghto [Tuotuo] 1977, 161.3782). Such action could result in success, as in 1018 when a crowd descended on the drum tower to challenge the results of the last civil service examinations. The court had the papers re-examined, the results changed, and the responsible examiner demoted (Niu 2005, 103; for similar examples showing the examinations to be volatile events that could turn against those presiding over them, see Chaffee 1995 [1985], ch. 1). Petitioning by private citizens could also relate to matters of broader state interest, as in the case of individual students petitioning against the submission of the Song court to the demands of Jurchen generals when they occupied the capital of Kaifeng in the mid-1120s. Pamphleteering then also led to large-scale protests on the streets of Kaifeng. The

legacy of this tradition of protest was also invoked during the student protests of the 1910s and 1980s (De WeerdT, Holmes, and Watts 2018, 276).

Overall, we can conclude that negotiations, lawsuits, and petitions usually related to the broader reciprocal expectations between state agents, elites, and commoners. This does not imply, however, that we should consider late imperial Chinese commoners as subjects whose expectations were solely defined by governments. Local elites and commoners also defined new expectations in the negotiations described above. In Suzhou, for example, they successfully sued local clerks in 1273 for not maintaining a home for the elderly that had been set up by the community, thus redefining the expectation of what public welfare entailed (Gao 2009, 194). Local residents also expanded the scope of government activity by bringing new business to it, expecting local officials to intervene in matters that had not been part of regular government transactions before. Contracts moved into the official arena after they had been used in private transactions. Suzhou families also managed to have local officials intervene when clan regulations were violated by clan members (194). Indeed, various kinds of mediators also took advantage of the expansion of local government activity, setting up litigation services, schools teaching legal regulations, or restaurants and hotels for those with business at the local government as Huang Liuhong acknowledged (De WeerdT and Watts [Forthcoming](#)). Apart from these kinds of local interactions, cultural elites also networked with peers in the region, across the empire, and in the capital to promote the interests of their locality, to lobby for tax reduction and more generous student quota, or against the implementation of government projects.

Conclusion

Attentive readers will have noticed that I have up until now avoided speaking of ‘Chinese citizens’ in history, using instead the terms commoners, the people, or residents to translate Chinese expressions like ‘min’ and ‘baixing.’ I have done this because it is standard practice in English academic discourse and because I set out to problematize the meaning and use of both ‘citizen’ and ‘subject.’ Supplementing J.G.A. Pocock’s short but prescient observations on ‘the ideal of citizenship since classical times’ in the European context that ‘the advent of jurisprudence... brought about some equation of the citizen with the subject’ (Pocock 1998, 39), I hope to have shown that, if in European history citizens have also been subjects, in Chinese history subjects have also acted as citizens. We have tended to overestimate the impact of rights and institutions in European history, bracketing real exclusion and the limited scope of action for many; and, we have tended to discount informal and formal channels of negotiation and effective action in the absence of those same rights and institutions in the Chinese case.

Based on an understanding of citizenship that prioritizes participation and action over legal rights, I have proposed that Chinese citizenship was based on reciprocal commitments and benefits between emperors, officials, and the people that derived from these groups’ corporate membership in a political community that was imagined as an organic body. Members of these groups (and the subgroups in which they were subdivided) were citizens whose actions were required for the community’s proper functioning and survival, but there were also groups who merely received protection

and could not take the kinds of action described above. Local administrative manuals and legal codes included special provisions for children, slaves and servants, the elderly, and bandits; foreigners who remained under the jurisdiction of other states were outside the body. Local administrative manuals further show that reciprocal expectations between state agents and the governed varied according to status, with official families, licentiates, students, the wealthy, and village elders enjoying more extensive participation and greater negotiating power than the majority of the illiterate.

The entirety of the ruled, ‘the min,’ were since pre-imperial times seen as a powerful threat whose trust rulers and officials could not do without. The people were seen as a malleable force, one that needed to listen and follow commands, but citizens were also listened to. Reports on local circumstances needed to be sent it, and local officials were advised to investigate ‘the people’s feelings’ in person and by networking with local elites. When expectations were not met, citizens protested and networked with peers but there were also regular channels including rituals to welcome and send off officials, lectures, petitioning, and lawsuits, by which they could make their voices heard to state agents and make claims with or against them. This activity was defined by the framework of longstanding reciprocal commitments, which were endorsed by central and local governments, but also left scope for the redefinition or amplification of such commitments on the part of citizens. Such activity was predominantly local, but, especially the literati or cultural elites, also participated in empire-wide discourses on current affairs. As I have argued elsewhere, the increasing participation of cultural elites who did not hold office in the production and circulation of current affairs texts about the empire helps explain why large-scale empires predominated in Chinese history since the thirteenth century (De Weerd [2015](#)).

Citizenship was not theorized as rights, mediation was often begrudgingly engaged in by those who wrote about it in administrative manuals, but the rhetoric of understaffed local officials underscored the fact that local negotiation was key to governance in imperial China. We tend to look at Chinese history through a twentieth-century lens, forgetting that state penetration was not so deep or widespread in imperial times and that governance was then explicitly based on the cooperation of local elites, as Song and Qing manuals show. Negotiation between state agents and local elites did not lead to a clearer separation between the state and civil society in the Chinese case; mediators spread the logics of the imperial state to an expanding citizenry. At the same time, such processes also allowed local citizens to shape policy priorities and local adaptations thereof to their own interests. From this perspective, authoritarian regimes have both subjects and citizens, on a sliding scale. They are also characterized by a high level of arbitrariness, by cycles of expansion and contraction of the scope of citizens’ negotiating power. Already in the 1960s Benjamin Schwartz, an intellectual historian of imperial China, described the cycles of ‘fang’ 放 (loosening) and ‘shou’ 收 (tightening) as he saw them developing in the politics of the early years of the People’s Republic of China (Schwartz [1965](#), 17–19. For a later elaboration of this model as applied to the politics of the 1980s and 1990s, see; Baum 1996 [[1994](#)]). These have characterized Chinese politics, citizenship, and subjecthood in the decades that followed his assessment and they can be seen retrospectively as well. There were times when there was far less scope for participation and active persecution of those who made use of the ‘avenues

of speech,’ and there were times when literati and local opinion had more of an impact. The formal incorporation of the political elite if not of the majority of citizens has remained a persistent tension in imperial and modern Chinese history and remains off the constitutional agenda for now (Kuhn 2002).

Notes

1. Prak (2018, 251–62) similarly covers local practices in his discussion of early modern Chinese citizenship. This work draws on an earlier literature on state-society relations especially Rowe (1984, 1989). There is, in addition, a more extensive literature on Confucian citizenship arguing for the compatibility of Confucian philosophy with a more expansive definition of citizenship; given the philosophical inclination and the relative neglect of broader social and political historical considerations in this literature, I am not explicitly engaging it below. See, for example, Nuyen (2002); Kim (2010); Yao (2014).
2. Membership in a polity should not be confused with citizenship in a nation-state. There currently is some debate about the question whether some pre-twentieth-century Chinese polities should be considered nations or whether they were empires. For the former see Tackett (2017), for the latter De Weerdt (2015, 2018).
3. Gorman shows how subjecthood was explicitly defined in relation to citizenship in nineteenth-century British public debates. Subjecthood was on the whole defined as a personal tie between individuals and the crown, brought with it private rights relating mostly to private protection, and allowed for sentiments of loyalism across the different territories of the British Empire. Citizenship implied a constitutional tie to the state and political rights; citizenship was then defined, or better negotiated, locally, and rights varied considerably across the territories.
4. For comparable examples of the interdependent relationship between central state regulations and local practices, see De Weerdt (2007, 2015); Szonyi (2017).

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